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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 000109

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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS: AFTER THE COLLAPSE

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Ref:

¶A. The Hague 108 (C)

¶B. The Hague 97

¶1. Summary: Following the fall of the Dutch coalition government on February 20, Queen Beatrix is expected to ask the Christian Democrats (CDA) and the Christian Union (CU) to stay on as a caretaker government and to prepare for new national elections. The elections are expected to take place in the second half of May. The caretaker government will have the authority to handle ongoing business but has a mandate to stay clear of controversial issues, likely to include the future Dutch involvement in Afghanistan. End summary.

¶2. On February 20, Prime Minister Balkenende (CDA) tendered the resignation of the Labor Party (PvdA) Ministers and State Secretaries to the Queen. He also put the portfolios of the other Ministers and State Secretaries of the remaining coalition members - the Christian Democratic (CDA) and Christian Union (CU) parties - at her disposal.

What happens now?

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¶3. On February 22, the Queen will consult Prime Minister Balkenende (CDA), Deputy Prime Minister Bos (PvdA), and Deputy Prime Minister Rouvoet (CU), as well as the presidents of both Houses of Parliament and the vice-president of the Council of State on how to proceed. She most likely will accept the resignation of the PvdA Ministers and State Secretaries and ask the remaining CDA and CU Ministers and State Secretaries to carry on. The PvdA portfolios likely will be taken over by other cabinet members. It is also possible that some CDA and CU officials will be appointed to handle these portfolios. An unlikely alternative is that the Queen will appoint a mediator in an attempt to put the coalition government back together.

¶4. If the Queen accepts the resignation of the PvdA ministers and state secretaries, the following persons will leave the cabinet: Finance Minister Wouter Bos, Education Minister Ronald Plasterk, Development Minister Bert Koenders, Integration Minister Eberhard van der Laan, Environment Minister Jacqueline Cramer, Interior and Kingdom Relations Minister Guusje ter Horst, European Affairs Minister Frans Timmermans, Trade secretary Frank Heemskerk, State Secretary for Justice Nebahat Albayrak, State Secretary for Education Sharon Dijksma, State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment Jette Klijnsma, and State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sports Jette Bussemaker.

¶5. Traditionally, the caretaker cabinet is expected to prepare for new elections, handle ongoing government business, and 'do whatever is necessary in the national interest'.

¶ 16. Parliament is expected to return from recess this week for a debate on the political situation. Within two weeks, parliament will draft a list of specific issues that it deems "controversial" and on which it will not take action until a new government is formed. Strictly speaking, it is not prohibited to take action on these issues, but parliament prefers to shelve them and leave decisions to the next government. The list is bound to include the military mission in Uruzgan. Prime Minister Balkenende said that if the Netherlands still wants to undertake something in Afghanistan after 2010, the initiative now lies with parliament. Other issues that are likely to be declared controversial include the intended procurement of a second Joint Strike Fighter test plane and spending cuts.

¶ 17. Once the Queen asks the caretaker cabinet to prepare for new elections, they are required to take place within 83 days after the Queen's signing of the decision to dissolve parliament. Parties have forty days to present their lists of candidates, and elections are held at the latest 43 days thereafter. Depending on when the Queen signs the decision to dissolve parliament, elections could be held on May 19 at the earliest if she signs it right away. For practical reasons, slight adjustments to the election date are possible. Elections are traditionally held on Wednesdays.

¶ 18. As reported in Ref B, the expectation is that the election will produce a fragmentation of a Dutch political spectrum into a dozen smaller and medium-sized parties without any larger parties. This will make it extremely difficult to put together a new coalition government of perhaps four to five parties that has the support of a majority in parliament. This process may well take anywhere between two to nine months, during which time the caretaker government continues operating under the same mandate as before the elections.

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¶ 19. COMMENT: The Dutch management of a collapsed government is not uncommon and for the most part normal business will continue unabated. However, certain ad hoc situations evolve and specific details will unfold on a daily basis in regards to the future of controversial issues, assignment of portfolios for vacating Ministers, and political developments into the election. The most controversial issue receiving profuse speculation is the impact of the situation on the continued Dutch commitment in the Uruzgan province in Afghanistan. Post will report separately on the options that begin to develop for future commitments in Afghanistan as well as other high profile issues. END COMMENT.

LEVIN